

## Ex-President's Personal Record

## Lyndon Begins War on Poverty

This is the fourth in a series of 12 articles excerpted from "The Vantage Point," President Johnson's personal record of his five years in the White House. In this installment the former chief executive details his first campaign in the war on poverty.

## BY LYNDON B. JOHNSON

The first full day of my Presidency was loaded with the urgencies of government in crisis. When I recall that day, I think of people: People entering my office, people leaving my office, people meeting in my office, people waiting in my reception room, a steady stream of people. They included former Presidents, cabinet officers, leaders of Congress and staff members.

Among the latter was Walter Heller, chairman of the Council of Economic Advisers, who came to see me at 7:40 p. m. He wanted to tell me about the research recently conducted on the problem of poverty.

Heller told me that early in November he had asked the departments and agencies of the federal government for ideas that could be used in developing a program to alleviate poverty. He said that he had discussed the subject with John Kennedy three days before his assassination. At that time, Heller told me, President Kennedy had approved his going ahead with plans for a program but had given no guidance as to the specific content.

## Three Conditions Required

Now Heller had come to ask me an urgent question: Did I want the Council of Economic Advisers to develop a program to attack poverty?

Before me now was a call for action, a call for a revolutionary new program to attack one of the most stubbornly entrenched social ills in America. Like most social change, such a revolution would not come without a struggle. My perceptions of America persuaded me that three separate conditions were required before social change could take root and flourish in our national life—a recognition of need, a willingness to act, and someone to lead the effort. In 1963 I saw those three conditions coming together in historic harmony.

The poverty program Heller described was my kind of undertaking.

"I'm interested," I responded. "I'm sympathetic. Go ahead. Give it the highest priority. Push ahead full tilt."

Work on the program continued thru December. I announced at a press conference that poverty legislation would be "high on the agenda of priority" in our requests to Congress in 1964. We continued our search for ways to reduce spending, mainly in defense but in other departments as well, so that money could be used to launch the poverty program. A poverty bill that would increase the budget at the outset would have little chance of success.

## Long Hours Spent on Program

We were moving into uncharted territory. Powerful forces of opposition would be stirred. Many people warned me not to get caught in the snare of a program directed entirely toward helping the poor.

Walter Heller and Kermit Gordon, director of the Bureau of the Budget, worked together as the government's "poverty team" in these early days. They came to the LBJ Ranch over the Christmas week at the end of 1963. I spent many long hours with them, discussing, planning, and evolving the outlines of a poverty program.

The problem of poverty in the 1960s was not the same as that of the hard times in the 1930s. During the Depression, we had been concerned mainly with educated and trained people who had been temporarily dislocated by the sickness of the economy.

The poverty of the 1960s, the paradoxical poverty in the midst of plenty, was of another breed. The economy was booming. Jobs were plentiful, but the unemployed were incapable of filling them. The most significant aspects of this new poverty, once the spotlight of attention was thrown on it, were the dismaying nature of its stubborn entrenchment and the total entrapment of its victims from one generation to the next.

## Breaking of Pattern Needed

A man was poor if he did not have enough money to live on, but that was only part of it. If he was poor, the consequences were that he had little education, that he received inadequate medical care and substandard nutrition, that he lived in crowded and unsanitary conditions. He had no real chance to train for a decent job.

Moreover, he had been poor all his life and was destined to die poor. His children could look forward to the same hopeless cycle, from a deprived youth to a bleak and despairing old age. The poor man was trapped; no escape was possible; hope was beyond his understanding. To defeat poverty meant breaking this cruel pattern.

For one thing, I was convinced that a successful program would have to provide not only special services but, more important, the opportunities for people to lift themselves out of the treadmill of poverty. For another, I wanted to place heavy emphasis on efforts to help children and youth. They offered the best hope of breaking the poverty cycle.

Gordon and Heller had been thinking in terms of a pilot venture to be carried out in a limited number of "demonstration project" cities. But I urged them to broaden their scope. I was certain that we could not start small and hope to propel a program thru the Congress. It had to be big and bold and hit the whole nation with real impact.

## \$500 Million Earmarked in Budget

We managed to earmark \$500 million in the budget to launch the antipoverty drive, much of it derived from Defense Department economies. In addition, the budget contained another \$500 million for federal agency efforts—such as manpower training—which would also strike at poverty in one way or another. I instructed Gordon to incorporate these funds in the poverty program so that we could launch the campaign at a \$1 billion level.

The challenge I presented to my advisers was the development of a new concept. I didn't want to paste together a lot of existing approaches. I wanted original, inspiring ideas.